

The Hardest Article to Write

So You Want to Be a Journalist · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

Student: You have eight fingers and two thumbs with which to TYPE your work. You might be smart enough to have become a touch typist.

Can you imagine the frustrating, painstaking slowness of being able to only dictate via one eye blinking, one letter at a time?

Never complain . . . someone always has a life more difficult than you.

-- Simon Townsend

It's always hard to write

So, you think it is hard to write.

Consider a writer named Jean-Dominique Bauby. He wrote a book you must read, called "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly". In early 2008 the book came out as a movie . . . please hire it from your video shop.

To create this tremendously affecting memoir, Bauby used the only tool available to him - his left eye - with which he blinked out a code, and his blinks were transcribed, and thus he wrote its short chapters, letter by letter.

Two years before, Bauby, then the 43-year-old editor-in-chief of Elle France, suffered a rare stroke to the brain stem; only his left eye and brain escaped damage. Rather than accept his "locked in" situation as a kind of death, Bauby ignited a fire of the imagination under himself and lived his last days - he died two days after the French publication of this slim volume - spiritually unfettered.

In these pages Bauby journeys to exotic places he has and has not been, serving himself delectable gourmet meals along the way (surprise: everything's ripe and nothing burns). In the simplest of terms he describes how it feels to see reflected in a window "the head of a man who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde."

In 1995, Bauby was the father of two young children, a 43-year-old known and loved for his wit, his style, and his impassioned approach to life. By the end of the year he was also the victim of a rare kind of stroke to the brainstem. After 20 days in a coma, Bauby awoke into a body which had all but stopped working: only his left eye functioned, allowing him to see and, by blinking it, to make clear that his mind was unimpaired.

Almost miraculously, he was soon able to express himself in the richest detail: dictating a word at a time, blinking to select each letter as the alphabet was recited to him slowly, over and over again. In the same way, he was able eventually to compose this extraordinary book.

By turns wistful, mischievous, angry, and witty, Bauby bears witness to his determination to live as fully in his mind as he had been able to do in his body. He explains the joy, and deep sadness, of seeing his children and of hearing his aged father's voice on the phone. In magical sequences, he imagines travelling to other places and times and of lying next to the woman he loves.

Fed only intravenously, he imagines preparing and tasting the full flavour of delectable dishes. Again and again he returns to an "inexhaustible reservoir of sensations," keeping in touch with himself and the life around him.

This book is a lasting testament to his life.

Reprinted from *The Wonderful World of Journalism*. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.